

OUR DAY in THE GERMAN GESTAPO

by Rufus M. Jones

The story has often been told of the visit of three Quaker men, D. Robert Yarnall, George Walton, and myself, to the German Gestapo at the end of December, 1938. The "Day of Broken Glass" occurred on November 10th, 1938. Many Jews were killed the night of the 9th. All Jewish shops had their windows broken and much of their possessions ruined. Synagogues which could be burned without endangering German property, were set on fire. Thirty-five thousand Jews were taken to concentration camps that day. The free food centers, which had been set up by the Jews for feeding their people who had been reduced to poverty, were destroyed and ceased to function.

Impressed as we were by the sufferings of the Jews in this crisis, Clarence Pickett and I visited the German Ambassador in Washington and asked him to get permission of his Government for the Service Committee to take relief to the Jews who were suffering in Germany. He promised to use his best efforts to secure the permission. Quite naturally, as we can now understand, no results came from these efforts. It appears very plainly from the facts now known that the events of "the Day of Broken Glass" were planned by the Heads of the Nazi Party and executed by their subordinates who consequently could not at the time be expected to be punished for the crimes committed.

Our minds were so occupied with the desire to get help and relief to those who were suffering that we gave almost no thought to the dangers which confronted us on this visit. We waited two weeks before starting, in the vain hope that the German Ambassador would succeed in opening the door for the proposed relief. Of course no door was opened.

At the November meeting of the American Friends Service Committee a deep concern spread over the group that a delegation should be sent at once to Germany. At the Board meeting the first Wednesday in December a positive decision was reached to go forward with the delegation. The three Friends above mentioned were selected and I was asked to be chairman of the delegation.

At the farewell meeting before we sailed, I spoke briefly as follows: "There must be no illusions in our mind about this venture of ours. The difficulties of

space, of distance, of stubborn ocean stretches we can probably overcome. Mountains can be tunneled; they can even be removed. Matter is no doubt stubborn, but nothing in the universe is so utterly unconquerable as a mind possessed by a set of ideas that have become entrenched and sacred. Our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with an intangible set of entrenched ideas, what we now call 'ideologies'. We can almost certainly accomplish some practical things which need personal attention. Whether we can influence minds or soften hearts or make spiritual forces seem real—that remains to be seen. We shall do our best and wisest and we shall go in the strength of God."

We sailed on the S. S. Queen Mary, which made a record trip on that crossing. When we were in the middle of the ocean I was called up by radio-telephone and asked by the *Philadelphia Record* for information as to the aims of our trip. I refused to give any information, whereupon a sensational article appeared the next morning, built on imagination, telling of a proposed Quaker visit to Herr Hitler! This was taken up by the London papers with corresponding headlines. The information was being hawked about the streets of London that morning. And so the "information" reached Goebbels in Germany in advance of our arrival, and he wrote the famous article on "The Three Wise Men" who were coming to "save" Germany—a scurrilous article.

We landed at Cherbourg, spent the evening in Paris with Allen Hole and his wife, exchanged our money, engaged sleepers for Berlin and were there next morning, five days from the time we left home.

We at once formed a small conference group which included Howard Elkinton, head of the German Center; Paul Sturge, who had joined us from London; Jim Lieftinck of Holland; and prominent German Friends who were from time to time invited. We spent all our evenings counseling on ways of procedure and on aims to be accomplished. Our first visit was to the State Department. It very soon became evident that little could be accomplished through the State Department.

The first Sunday morning after our arrival there appeared a scathing article in Goebbels' official newspaper against "Gesellschaft der Freunde," which we naturally supposed meant the Society of Friends. We went to Quaker Meeting that morning in a discouraged state of mind, convinced by this terrible article that our visit was in vain and that we might as well turn around and come home. We had a wonderful meeting, however, with great depth of life and power. After meeting was over we learned through a very intelligent person that the "Gesellschaft" that was being attacked was a society of the Masonic Order and

had nothing whatever to do with Die Gesellschaft der Freunde. What a relief it was! Meantime through consultation with Jewish agencies and leading Jews we worked out a plan for the extensive migration of as many Jews as could be got out of the country and for bringing relief to the more desperate cases in Germany.

When we had our plans matured it had become clear to everybody that we must visit the chiefs of the Gestapo, in hope of securing from them the necessary permission to undertake the purveying of relief. Every avenue of approach had been tried. Every department of the Government that offered any hope had been visited. We had knocked at all doors that gave a chance of forwarding our main purpose. Everybody said, or intimated, that only the chiefs of the Gestapo could issue the permission we were seeking. And everybody knew, though we didn't know, that the Gestapo had done the deed.

The Monday after our decision was reached we went in the morning to the office of the American Consul-General, Raymond Geist. If ever there was a good man, he was one. We told him that we had to visit the chiefs of the Gestapo and that we knew of nobody but himself who could make the visit possible. He said, "I will do what a man can." After trying to telephone, which we already knew always failed to get any response, he put on his hat and went into the storm that was raging that day in Berlin—said to have been the worst storm and lowest temperature for eighty years! In about half an hour we were summoned. We leaped into a taxi and drove to the huge buildings. Six black-shirted soldiers with helmets and muskets escorted us to the great iron doors which opened and let us in to the ominous building. It is gone now. Nobody will ever see it again. We were given tickets and were told that we did not need them to get in but we should need them to get out!

We went through seven corridors, each one opening into an uncovered square, and then climbed five flights of stairs to a top room where Raymond Geist met us and said: "I have done it. Two chief officers of the Gestapo have been delegated to hear your plans and to get a decision on your project." The chief of the Gestapo at this time was Heydrich, nicknamed the "Hangman," who was later assassinated in Czechoslovakia. He was in the next room and we could see him through the window. But our first task was to convince the two hard-faced, iron-natured men assigned to us. The night before I had prepared an opening message; had had it carefully translated into German and typed. I asked the two men to read it before we began our discussions. It was as follows:

"We have come to Germany at this present time to

see whether there might be any service which American Quakers could render, and to use every opportunity open to us to understand the present situation. Those whom we are to consult should clearly understand that we have had close and friendly relations with the German people throughout the whole post-war period. We represent no governments, no international organizations, no parties, no sects, and we have no interest in propaganda in any form. We have always been unhappy over the conditions of the Peace Treaty and in spirit opposed to those conditions.

"We came to Germany at the time of the blockade, organized and directed the feeding of German children, reaching at the peak no less than a million two hundred thousand children per day. We were the first to arrive in Vienna after the war where we brought in eight hundred cows and supplied the children in the hospitals with milk and brought in coal for the fires in the hospitals. After the different revolutions in Austria we gave relief to the families of those who suffered most in these collisions, always having permission from the existing government to do so. At the time of the 'Anschluss' we were distributing food to a large number of Nazi families.

"In all this work we have kept entirely free of party lines or party spirit. We have not used any propaganda, or aimed to make converts to our own views. We have simply, quietly, and in a friendly spirit endeavored to make life possible for those who were suffering. We do not ask who is to blame for the trouble which may exist or what has produced the bad situation. Our task is to support and save life and to suffer with those who are suffering.

"We have come now in the same spirit as in the past and we believe that all Germans who remember the past and who are familiar with our ways and methods and spirit will know that we do not come to judge or to criticize or to push ourselves in, but to inquire in the most friendly manner whether there is anything we can do to promote life and human welfare and to relieve suffering."

They read the document slowly, carefully and thoughtfully. It plainly *reached* them and we noted a softening effect on their faces, which needed to be softened. Then followed a prolonged conference in which we presented our plans and pleaded our cause, answering many questions. Finally the leader said: "We are now withdrawing to consult with the Chief Heydrich and in about twenty-five minutes we shall report the decision."

During this awesome period we bowed our heads and entered upon a time of deep, quiet meditation and

prayer—the only Quaker Meeting ever held in the Gestapo! It proved to have been rightly ordered. The two men returned at the announced time and the leader said: "Everything you have asked for is granted." I said, "That is splendid. We should like to have the report in writing." "No," the leader said, "the Gestapo does not give its decisions in writing." "What will be the evidence, then," I asked, "that this decision has been made?" "Every word," he said, "that has been spoken in this room has been recorded by a mechanism and this decision will be in the record." We were glad then that we had kept the period of hush and quiet and had uttered no words for the record! The leader then said, "I shall telegraph tonight to every police station in Germany that the Quakers are given full permission to investigate the sufferings of Jews and to bring such relief as they see necessary."

It is unlikely that the message was ever actually sent. But in all other respects the promise made to us was kept, and the door was opened for the extensive relief which followed our visit, including the emigration of many Jews. It will always be something of a mystery why the Gestapo, which was itself deeply involved in producing the tragic situation we went to relieve, should have received us, respectfully listened to our plea, and finally granted our unusual request to try to repair the damage they had done. No doubt the fact that American Quakers had come to feed German children after the first World War, and that some of them themselves had shared in the feeding, counted for something and made its due impression.

But I think there was something more subtle than this memory of past favors. I believe for the moment these hard and brutal-minded men, accustomed only to ways of force and violence, found themselves confronted with an unexpected new way of life, which had at its heart another kind of force to which they, in a moment of softness, yielded and paid their respect. If that view is correct the outcome was a miracle wrought by the way of love. The gentleness of the men at the end of our meeting with them, the fact that they went and got our coats and helped us put them on, and shook our hands with good-bye wishes and with a touch of gentleness, made me feel then, and now in retrospect, that something unique had happened in their inside selves.

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